

# “WHAT MATTERS”

CARING CONVERSATIONS  
ABOUT END OF LIFE”



## WHAT MATTERS: PASSOVER HAGGADAH COMPANION

In this companion piece to the Passover haggadah, we include three beautiful writings, followed by thoughtful questions for personal and communal reflection, from three rabbis who weave together several themes of Pesach, What Matters, and Jewish texts and traditions. Each of them may be viewed through the lens of the current circumstances in which we find ourselves, yearning for meaning in these uncertain times.

Rabbi Michael Strassfeld discusses the spiritual quality of “enoughness,” adding another dimension to *Dayenu*, the well-known song that we gaily sing at our seder tables. Rabbi Marion Lev Cohen teaches us that times of challenge, such as our encountering of the current “plague,” can offer unexpected moments of clarity. And Rabbi Brian Fink focuses on the counting of the Omer, in the days between Pesach and Shavuot, which call us to be present even as we face the fragility of our lives.

We know that this year will be different from all other years in that most of us will be sitting at our seder tables with our loved ones or our communities on computer screens, separated but connected. It is our hope at What Matters that this companion will touch many emotions that we are all feeling at this time and help to close the necessary physical distancing we are experiencing. Please feel free to use it as you wish: include it creatively in your seders; reflect on the messages as you prepare for your seder; or share it with others.

And as many of us are thinking about what is most important in our lives right now, please feel free to reach out to the What Matters team at your synagogue or organization if you would like practical assistance with your advance care planning ([www.whatmattersny.org](http://www.whatmattersny.org)).

Chag sameach and warmest wishes for your health, strength, and well-being,

**Sally Kaplan**

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## DAYENU—FINDING MEANING IN THE SMALL THINGS

By Rabbi Michael Strassfeld

(Adapted from his forthcoming book, *Judaism Disrupted*)

*Dayenu* is the most well-known Passover song, probably because of its simple refrain and rollicking tune. Yet, if you think about what it is saying, it makes little sense. Would it really be enough if God had taken us out of Egypt but had not divided the sea for us? Wouldn't the pursuing Egyptians have re-enslaved us? Or enabled us to reach Mount Sinai but hadn't given us the Torah? What would have been the point?

*Dayenu* is actually suggesting an important spiritual principle of enoughness. We live our lives with ambitions and hopes. Some are fulfilled. Some never happen. Some, with the passage of time, fade away or are lost. Even as we mourn the losses, we are to remember the blessings that we have. We need to look at our lives in perspective. It is true I am not as flexible as I once was, and that my hearing is declining. Yet it is also true that I can still see, and that I enjoy my grandchildren. The practice is to enjoy what I do have. I should place the reality of the decline that is part of aging in the larger context of my whole life. All of it is the reality of my life. Let me remember to see even as my eyes dim; to communicate even when it seems easier to sit alone in my room. I can smell and taste. I can touch and be touched. Neither the great moments nor the sad moments alone are the sum total of my life. In the context of What Matters, we think about what we would want for the last period of our life:

*Dayenu*

*It would be enough to be surrounded by family and friends*

*It would be enough to eat my favorite food*

*It would be enough to be at home with the sun shining in my bedroom*

*It would be enough to listen to my favorite music*

A follower of the Kotzker rebbe complained about not getting a tallit (a four-cornered prayer shawl) from his in-laws—a standard wedding present. The Kotzker replied: Then wrap yourself in the four corners of the world and pray!

The story teaches that you can lack many things, but that doesn't stop you from being able to feel embraced by the universe as you wrap yourself with it and with the precious memories of your life. That would be enough—*dayenu*.

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### DISCUSS:

*What would be the small things that would give you pleasure?*

*What would be the more important things that would make it be enough—*dayenu*?*

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## THE 11TH PLAGUE

By Rabbi Marion Lev-Cohen

Why is this year's seder different from those of other years? This year we amend the 10th plague, *makat bekhorot*, Death of the Firstborn, with our current plague of COVID-19.

As our ancestors anxiously hunkered down, praying for God to spare their lives, did they worry about what they had left unsaid and undone to transmit their legacy to the next generation? As we shelter at home, fearing the toll of today's plague, we turn inward both physically and spiritually. Like our ancestors, have we reflected and communicated to our loved ones the values that have guided and shaped our lives?

According to Me'or Eynayim, an 18th-century rabbinic commentator, when our ancestors were slaves in Egypt, awareness itself was in exile. As our ancestors came through the Red Sea, they regained their awareness and agency. As we move through this challenging time, may we, like our ancestors, be blessed with the gift of awareness to clarify what is deeply important to each of us.

Both leaving Egypt and self-sheltering during COVID-19 are liminal moments in which extraordinary events disrupt our daily lives. These ruptures give us clarity, awareness, and agency to have the difficult conversations we generally avoid.

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### DISCUSS:

*What values inform our choices regarding future health care decisions?*

*Why are these conversations so difficult?*

*How can these conversations give us agency not only for the present, but for the rest of our lives?*

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# COUNTING THE OMER...COUNTING OUR DAYS

By Rabbi Brian Fink

לְמִנּוֹת יָמֵינוּ כֵּן הוֹדַע וְנִבְּא לִבֵּב חֲכָמָה

*Limnot yameinu, ken hodah, v'navi l'vav chochmah.*

Teach us to number our days, That we might gain a heart of wisdom - Psalm 90:12

Starting on the second night of Passover, we begin to count the Omer, numbering the days from Passover to Shavuot, moving from freedom to revelation.

The Omer reflects a set number of days and marks both our physical time and our spiritual journey. This year we are also counting our days in a different way—days of isolation, weeks of closure, months of uncertainty.

We don't yet know what the 49 days of the Omer will mean for us this year, as we start moving toward one set end point, Shavuot, but also continue adding an unknown number of days. How long will we be stuck at home? What will be the length of the pandemic? When will life return to a sense of normal?

In Psalm 90:12, the psalmist asks God for help, recognizing that life is fragile, and searching for the meaning that comes from that awareness. Realizing that each day is precious, and that our ultimate number of days is finite, can hopefully cause us to live a more purposeful life. A “heart of wisdom” is the goal—to live each day with intention, finding things to appreciate in each moment.

Today, in this unique moment, we are each challenged to find meaning in our separation, discovering the essence of what truly matters to us in the midst of this plague.

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## DISCUSS:

*What lessons will we have learned when we hopefully emerge on the other side, whether on Shavuot, or slightly later?*

*What will we carry with us on our pilgrimage to our metaphorical Temple in Jerusalem?*

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Recite the following together on the second night of Passover:

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יי אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, אֲשֶׁר  
קִדְּשָׁנוּ בְּמִצְוֹתָיו, וְאָזְנוּ עַל סְפִירַת הָעֹמֶר

*Baruch atah Adonai Eloheinu melech  
ha'olam asher kid'shanu b'mitzvotav  
vitzivanu al sefirat ha'omer.*

Blessed are You, Adonai our God, Ruler of the universe, who sanctifies us with mitzvot, and commands us concerning the counting of the Omer.

הַיּוֹם יוֹם יוֹם אֶחָד לְעֹמֶר

*Hayom yom echad la-omer*

Today is the first day of the Omer.